

D is for Drowning by [lilies_in_a_vase](#)

Series: Lilies' Alphabet Soup of Pain [4]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Sibling, California, Drowning, F/M, Gen, Hurt Billy Hargrove, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Neil Hargrove Being an Asshole, POV Billy Hargrove, Pre-Season/Series 01, References to Religion (Catholicism), complicated family dynamics, no beta we die like men

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Neil Hargrove

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-07-04

Updated: 2021-07-04

Packaged: 2022-03-31 12:47:55

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,915

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

The salt hurts his throat as he swallows water, and doing his best not to feel scared, not to panic, because his mum taught him that was the worst thing you could do whilst swimming, Billy turns around to face the light reflecting the surface and swims up.

Billy is fourteen the day he almost drowns. It's Max' fault. Obviously.

D is for Drowning

Author's Note:

TRIGGER WARNING:

References to almost drowning, and a passing comment of a toddler once having drowned. Also references to Neil being abusive.

I googled some Saint Christopher prayers, but if there are any current or former Christians reading this, then please do let me know if anything really should be changed.

I hope you guys like this one too!

The day Billy almost drowns, is also the day Max almost drowns. Obviously.

Billy's been able to swim for almost as long as he's been able to walk. There is no version of his life where he almost drowns without Max somehow being involved.

Billy is fourteen, and cocky in the way that fourteen year olds are. When they've just started high school, when they kissed their first girl a year ago and their first boy a month ago (technically, the first time Billy kissed a boy was when he was twelve but that was just so they could practice in preparation for all the cute girls they were going to kiss, and it was sloppy and shit so Billy decided then and there not to count it). His dad got him a weight stand for his birthday and when Billy's not at the beach, he spends most of his time there.

Max is eleven, and stupid in the way eleven year olds are. She can swim - of course she can, no California kid would ever dare not knowing how to swim - but she prefers staying on the beach, or practice her skateboarding up on the boardwalk.

Except for when Billy lets her get on his board.

He's been surfing for years, and sometimes, when the waves aren't too high, he'll let her sit on it while he surfs. She'll let out squeals of delight and Billy will pretend he isn't smiling.

Had Billy been by himself, he would never have almost drowned. But Billy's not by himself. Billy's got Max, sitting on his board, babbling. Distracting him.

That's why he doesn't notice the big wave until it's already almost too late. And those few, precious seconds Billy spends trying to decide if it's better to try to get them to shore or to ride the wave out with Max, seal their fate.

The last thing Billy hears before the wave crashes over them and throws him into the ocean is Max' scream.

Something hard knocks into his head as he goes under, and for a moment, Billy can't figure out which way is up and which is down.

Then he resurfaces, only to realise that he can neither hear nor see Max, and Billy thinks his heart's about to stop.

He gulps in a big breath of air, precious air, and dives.

He has to keep his eyes open, trying to scan for Max, and the salt stings, the water pressure pressing on his ears and his head throbbing.

Max, Max, Max.

He can't see her.

He can't- *He can't see her.*

He's so worried he thinks he'll somehow start crying underwater. And only a small, tiny little portion of that worry is due to what his dad will surely do to him if Max dies.

He kicks his legs harder and dives deeper, further, to the sides, and-

And Billy's mouth opens without any conscious thought, just this desperate reaction to *there is too little air he can't breathe he's getting lightheaded-*

The salt hurts his throat as he swallows water, and doing his best not to feel scared, not to panic, because his mum taught him that was the worst thing you could do whilst swimming, Billy turns around to face

the light reflecting the surface and swims up.

He breaks through with a gasp and starts coughing up water. He thinks he understands what the survivors of the Titanic felt like when RMS Carpathia called out to them when Max' voice reaches his ears.

“Billy! Billy!”

He must've underestimated her swimming ability because she's still up here, splashing with her head above the surface when Billy'd thought she'd be halfway to the bottom by now. He hasn't underestimated her eleven year old stupidity, however, because Max is in fact *panicking in the water* and if Billy doesn't get to her then his first thought will almost definitely come true.

A wave comes as he's swimming towards her and almost pulls him back under. He tries to time it, tries to figure out when the waves will come until finally, finally, Billy's hand closes around Max's reaching fingers.

He pulls her toward him, and she grasps at his arms, his shoulders, trying to stay afloat. “Max, Max, Max,” Billy gasps. “Max- Don’t-!” One of her hands knocks into his head and Billy sees stars. “Max!” he shouts, louder, as harsh as the merciless waves that keep trying to drown him.

“Billy!” Max cries, because she's ten and scared and they may not always like each other but he's still kind of, technically, her big brother and Max trusts him and Billy thinks that is one of the worst and most precious things to have ever happened to him, Jesus *Christ*.

He turns around and moves Max' hands so she's got one of his shoulder, the other around his torso. He's going to have bruises from how hard she's holding on.

Billy's head is spinning and Max keeps pushing his mouth and nose underwater and he thinks he should've sunk by now, as heavy as he's getting from the amount of the Pacific Ocean he's swallowed.

He doesn't think he'll be able to get them to shore.

But he swims, and swims, and somewhere, someone, the gods of the ocean or whatever, must decide they've punished him enough, because Billy catches his board floating not too far away from them. It gives him new strength, this small bit of salvation, and Billy pushes through until they reach it.

Max scrambles off his back and Billy helps push her up on the board. He rests his arms on it, and sets his blurry vision on the beach.

And as Billy kicks his legs, directing them towards safety, he drags one hand up to clutch at his mother's old pendant. She was a flower child but her family was Catholic, her family pushed her straight into the arms of his father, freshly home from the war she'd been out in the streets protesting.

And for the first time in years, Billy prays.

“Saint Christopher, holy patron of travellers, protect us and lead us safely to our destination. Saint Christopher, holy patron of travellers, protect us and lead us safely to our destination. Saint Christopher, holy patron of travellers...”

Billy doesn't think he ever fully believed in God. His dad does, or pretends he does, at least, and his mum believed in everything that you could possibly believe in, she soaked up myth and legends and scriptures like a sponge, like anything and everything was equally as important, as true and good and real and alive.

Maybe there does exist a god. Some kind of god, at least, because Billy gets them to shore.

He hadn't noticed Susan's shrieking until it's just a few feet away.

She rushes into the water, her sundress still on and getting soaked at the skirt, clinging to her skin and wrapping itself around her legs. She reaches out for Max who more or less throws herself at her mum, the surfboard being pushed back towards the open water with Billy still clinging to it. It knocks the air out of his lungs.

His dad's there a second later, and for one stupid, wistful moment, Billy thinks that he'll reach out and help Billy up.

He doesn't, of course not, he just wraps his arms around Susan and Max and walks them back up to the beach, back to the four towels laid out in the sand next to their picnic basket. Like some serene little image of the picture perfect family they pretend to be.

Billy drags his exhausted body back to standing by himself. His feet sink into the wet sand and get buried as he tries to walk, and he contemplates just sitting back down where he is, just take a second to breathe in air instead of saltwater.

But Billy's not Max. Billy's not eleven and stupid - and Billy thinks that even at eleven he'd have known that just sitting down in the sea after this would've been a stupid idea - Billy's fourteen and Billy grew up with water safety being drilled into him by his mum before she ever let him near the ocean. Fuck, Billy's mum even told him about a woman who'd lived on her street whose toddler drowned in the bathtub.

So Billy takes his board under his arm and walks through the hot sand to his joke of a family.

Susan's fallen down on a towel with Max in her lap, both of them crying and Susan checking her over and begging for reassurances that she's okay. His dad's sitting next to them, like a goddamn guard dog, eyes worried and stance more protective than Billy thinks it's ever been when directed at him or his mum.

“Dad?” Billy croaks, instead of ‘sir’ because he hopes the childlike innocence in that one word will make his dad look at him with something akin to real care for once. Because Billy feels like absolute shit. Because he wants to sleep, and because a small part of him thinks he’s going to die.

“You,” his dad says, looking up at him, and Billy feels that tiny spark of hope get crushed into nothing. There’s so much burning vitriol in

his gaze that Billy takes a step back. “What the hell where you thinking?! When she’s out there on that board she’s your responsibility!”

She’s always my responsibility, Billy thinks. You made her that.

He doesn’t say that. Instead, he says something almost equally as stupid.

“I saved her!”

If possible, his dad’s gaze turns even darker, and Billy knows he’s getting hit as soon as they’re out of public eye. “And *whose fault* was it that she needed to be saved?”

Hers. Billy’s knows better than to say that though. He thinks he’s about to cry. There’s no other explanation for how blurry his dad’s getting.

“*Billy?*”

“Mine.” It hurts to admit it, because Billy doesn’t think it is. But his dad seems satisfied, nodding his head and turning back to hovering over Susan and Max.

Billy considers about turning to Susan. But she’s still clinging to Max and crying. Susan’s never done anything to actively hurt him before,

but if there's one thing that would bring her to finally raise her hand to him, it would surely be letting her precious baby Maxine get hurt.

For the first time in years, Billy misses his mum so much his heart aches and he thinks he's definitely about to start crying. When a month went by and she didn't call him, Billy had to finally face the reality that she wasn't coming back. He'd buried that pain down deep inside until it was just a constant, background ache that he learned to ignore. But now? Now he just wants her here.

But she's not. She's not here, she's not going to be here no matter how much he prays or begs the universe, and his dad's turned his back on him and Susan's busy with Max and Billy-

Billy still needs help.

He turns around, letting his board drop to the ground so corns of sand go flying and sticking to his legs. There's a lifeguard tower up ahead, higher up on the beach, and Billy's pretty sure he can see the lifeguard. There's a girl in front of him, her perm almost twice as big as her head, and she seems to be shouting, pointing in Billy's and his family's direction and throwing her drink at the lifeguard before stalking in the opposite direction.

The lifeguard's left alone, and Billy walks towards him with heavy steps, his legs feeling like they'll go out from under him any second now.

"What the hell you doing surfing with your little sister if you don't know how to surf, huh, kid?" the lifeguard shouts, even though he

can't be that much older than Billy. Eighteen, maybe. Nineteen. The lifeguard gestures in the direction the girl left. "I was about to score!" he complains.

He was flirting, Billy realises. He was fucking flirting. Billy wants to be a lifeguard. He's too young, still, but he wants to be one. Has always kind of wanted to.

Billy swears, then and there, that he won't ever let a pretty face distract him from work. Won't ever let anything distract him to the point that he doesn't react when two kids almost drown and a mother stands at shore screaming and crying.

"She was so fucking hot, man," the lifeguard sighs, but Billy doesn't really care.

The sun's beating down on him, the sand's burning his feet, his head aches and his vision swims. He doesn't care how hot that girl was.

He doesn't really care about anything, in that moment.

Two things happen at the same time. Billy feels vomit go gushing up his throat, and his legs go out from under him. The last thing he hears is Max shouting his name.

Billy hates Susan for bringing Max into his life.

He doesn't hate Max. That's the problem. It would be so, so much easier if he did.

But he doesn't, and that's a death sentence.

Because if something happens to Max, Billy knows his dad will blame him. Knows Susan will too, probably. She won't be able to help it. But the worst part is that some small part of Billy will blame himself, too.

Susan brought Max into his life, and for the first time since his mum left, Billy had something to care about other than himself.

Max likes to call him mean.

Billy will tell her that's just what older brothers are supposed to be like.

He's not certain if he believes it himself.

When Billy first opens his eyes, he's in the hospital. There's a bed next to his, Max sitting atop the covers and reading a comic.

He can hear his dad and Susan talking in muted voices. There's a strange quality to his dad's voice that Billy's too tired to try to make sense of.

He closes his eyes.

Next time, there's a doctor there, asking him questions. Billy forgets both the questions and his answers as soon as he's given them, and falls back asleep.

The third time, he's on the couch in the living room at home. Max is staring at him, her face inches from his, blue staring into blue, red

hair framing her in.

Billy flinches and groans when the sudden movement makes his head hurt. Max grins at him.

“I knew you were about to wake up!” she declares. “You snorted and your nose scrunched up like a bunny’s.” She sits back, and Billy takes a moment to take in the rest of his surroundings.

He’s got his pyjama pants on and a washed out band shirt. There’s a blanket resting on him. His pillow beneath his head. He can’t hear his dad or Susan. And Max has a bowl in her lap, and she’s eating-

“Is that...?” he asks, wide eyed.

“Blueberry ice cream,” Max nods. “Your dad bought it for you. But they let me have some, as well. He wanted to throw your board away, too, but mum convinced him not to. Do you want me to get you a bowl?”

His favourite ice cream. His dad hasn’t... *shit*.

His dad is sorry.

Back in the beginning, those first few times when he hit him real bad, when he had to call in Billy sick from school lest CPS be called by his teachers, Billy would hear his dad say a few prayers before bed - the

walls were thin in Billy's childhood home. They're not at Susan's place. Billy sometimes thinks that's why his dad wanted them to move in with her and Max, instead of the other way around - and then the next day, he'd bring home blueberry ice cream after work. First ask God for forgiveness and then ask Billy for it. Buy it from him.

He's never said he's sorry. Not out loud. Not to Billy. But he's bought him ice cream.

And Billy realises that he's been so out of it that his dad must have carried him. From the hospital and to the car and from the car to his bedroom where he must've changed Billy's clothes, and then he must've carried Billy out into the living room. Billy doesn't think his dad's ever changed his clothes, doesn't think he's ever changed a nappy, doesn't think he's ever seen him naked since the day he was born.

But he must've done it now. Because he would never have let Susan. Wouldn't have thought it appropriate.

And he'd gone out and bought him ice cream. Not *them*. He'd bought it specifically for Billy.

He'd been worried. He'd regretted not listening when Billy asked for his help.

“Billy?” Max says. “You want ice cream?”

Billy hopes that in a few years, he'll be strong enough to say no. No, he doesn't want his dad's sorry excuse of ice cream as an apology. That he'll be able to say that no, nothing can make up for the shit his dad puts him through. Not ice cream. Not anything. Nothing can make up for driving his mum away.

But today, Billy is fourteen, and he's still got hope. Perhaps Max isn't the only stupid one. He's just as stupid, but in a different way, because he looks at her, and he says yes.

Author's Note:

This one was very fun to write because around ninety percent of it takes place in the water, which was a cool challenge!